3: Leyburn Z-4,5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

THE HAITIAN PEOPLE

French were driven out. They could not but be alarmed as they saw the steady direction of Dessalines' moves toward a complete monopoly of land ownership by the state. On the very day following independence, a decree proclaimed that all lands owned by France in colonial days now belonged to Haiti. Next (February 7, 1804) Dessalines canceled all sales and donations made to mulattoes and ex-slaves by fleeing French who, in a last despairing effort to salvage something from the wreckage of olden days, had "returned" their lands to non-whites. By these two strokes all lands owned by white men before 1803 became state property,[5] but only the second clipped the wings of socially ambitious colored people.

Serious uneasiness was caused by the next measure, an order for a general verification of property titles. This would have been a delicate task at best, considering the disorder of the past thirteen years. It was made more complicated to carry out by the serious lack of men trained in law. A few like Balthazar Inginac, later an important adviser and trusted friend of two presidents, were scrupulously conscientious, but by the same token highly unpopular with those whom they deprived of newly (and shadily) acquired "estates." The majority of officials, according to report, listened to the pleading of many who had managed by hook or crook to secure a tenuous claim to vacant properties, validating their fraudulent titles for them. It has been claimed, without rebuttal, that most of these officials were not above taking bribes. When complaint was made to Dessalines of such actions he took steps to make his appointees do their duty, but each confiscation made new enemies for Dessalines.

Some of the mulattoes, citing their French paternity, claimed land formerly owned by their French fathers, even though these parents had never regarded their sons as more than bastards. Dessalines once broke out in furious answer to such a claimant: "*Et les pauvres nègres dont les pères sont en Afrique, ils n'auront donc rien!*"

The state took over thousands of acres. Those Haitians, colored or black, who aspired to landownership as the foundation of position,

5. The hatred of the Haitians for the French, and because of them, for white people in general, was seen not only in these confiscations but in commitments for the future. A proclamation of April 28, 1804, suppressed to "all foreigners" the right to own property in land. The first Haitian constitution, May 20, 1805, took an even more drastic step in saying that "no white man shall henceforth set foot in this country as a landowner," and that "*all* property formerly belonging to a white Frenchman" was now confiscate to the profit of the state.

3: Leyburn Z-4,5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

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prestige, and the normal fulfillment of dignity, were thus frustrated in their efforts. They began to see that the Emperor intended to withhold from them freedom, room for the exercise of ability or power, fullness of life in whatever form. Not only was there little opportunity for achieving prestige; the repressive and contemptuous attitude of Dessalines denied them even ordinary negative respect, without which dignity of life is impossible.

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By confiscation of vacant and falsely claimed estates, Dessalines created a vast public domain. He did not hesitate to secure other lands which he considered valuable, resorting to arbitrary and often cruel means—even, it is said, to forgery and murder—to dispossess those who stood firm in their claims. This attack on private property added other dissidents to his enemies—men who felt themselves clearly in the right legally and morally, men who with clear consciences joined the movement to put down a tyrant. The land thus [427] acquired was leased in parcels at an annual rent to the highest bidders.[6]

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The Emperor was blind to the normal human needs of the better elements of the population. He deprived them of property in land, the only basis they knew for wealth and independence; he forbade enterprises undertaken by individual initiative; he continually wounded delicate sensibilities. The Emperor was not a man to spare people's feelings, and he dared use the frank but dangerous words Negro and mulatto. He once shouted to a group of pleaders for position: "*Prenez garde à vous, nègres et mulâtres! Nous avons tous combattu contre les blancs; les biens que nous avons conquis en versant notre sang, appartiennent à nous tous; j'entends qu'ils soient partagés avec équité!*" It was not only Dessalines' idea of "equity" which aroused the *anciens libres* but his use of the descriptive nouns they hated.

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The colored people were well aware of the hostility of Dessalines to their group. He was inferior to them in learning, and knew it. He was certainly, by the world's judgment, inferior to them in birth. His very deficiencies by comparison with his colored subjects made him hate them more: for example, he was passionately fond of dancing, preferring compliments on his grace to praise of his statesmanship; yet his awkwardness on the ballroom floor even

6. Although there are no records extant to show the exact amount of land which Dessalines succeeded in bringing into state ownership, it is estimated that more than two thirds of all the productive plantations in Haiti in 1806 were in the hands of the government. Other estimates range as high as ninety per cent. [175] [425] [423]

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV/ Hait 3V3

at least a generation behind them, but rather their complete lack of any experience in self-rule. The author continues:

In addition to the vanity of the black which was flattered by the distribution of principalities and duchies, there was the political thought which wished to fortify things by words. The most important agricultural territories were distributed, with the property title, to the principal officers and civil agents of the government. Workers were allotted to these very much as were the Indians to the first Spanish conquerors . . . . Moreover, since African blood dominated in the North [that is, since there were few mulattoes and lighter-skinned people], the feudal lords, aided by the color of their skin, could enforce obedience to a yoke which in name only was modified [from slavery].[12]

The social organization of Christophe's kingdom, then, was one of large properties, with all the feudalistic trappings, resting upon a solid base of wage-earning serfdom. In contrast to medieval feudalism, the king was here much more than *primus inter pares*. Thanks to the policy of Dessalines, most land had come into state ownership, so that the nobility received their estates by royal favor, and held them as leases only so long as the King pleased. As in the Middle Ages, the noblemen were petty monarchs within the district granted to their jurisdiction. Their freedom of action, however, was even here subject to scrutiny: detachments of Royal Dahomets[14] were stationed in every cantonment or parish, to enforce discipline, keep the King informed, and find their own subsistence without a drain on the royal treasury. In every district was set up a court of *chef-chasseur* to see that justice obtained.[15] The King's law, not the nobleman's private code, prevailed in the whole country.[16]

13. R. Lepelletier *de Saint-Remy, Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1846), II, 167–168.

14. Organized after the model of the police force existing in France before 1789.

15. These courts were composed of a royally appointed marechal and his assistant, a king's procurer, and a clerk.

16. The Code Henry was promulgated on January 30, 1812. It consisted of seven parts: Civil, Commercial, Shipping and Maritime, Civil Process, Criminal and Police Process, Agricultural, and Military. In general the Code followed French precedent, but the section on Agriculture was Christophe's own. Sir James Baskett (in his *History of the Island of St. Domingo* [London, 1818], p. 413) calls this part "a thing unexampled among other nations." It reveals not only the King's absorption in the main economic enterprise of his state, but also his skill in devising an integrated functioning of a social order of nobility and serfs with a plantation economy based on money crops. This Agricultural Law regulated such diverse matters as the reciprocal duties of proprietors and cultivators, the policing of plantations, and the culture and preparation of the major crops. It set forth industry as the parent of virtue, and idleness as the source of vice.

3: Leyburn Z-4,5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

to be conformed. They had lost their best friend and their "petit père." 175

Dessalines would be emperor and Christophe king, but Pétion 643
was content to remain a simple president. He was an anomaly—as if 159
a Parisian of delicate sensibilities and mellow tolerance had somehow come to power with a darker skin in an alien land.

He has been highly praised and is worthy of eulogy. The fact remains that his country was rich when he came to power and poor when he died; united in 1806 and divided in 1818. Candor compels his admirers to admit that many of the calamities of the social and economic history of Haiti can be traced back to Pétion's administration.

The crucial act of Pétion was to parcel the land. From that policy 175
flowed the enduring consequences which became the predominant 423
socio-economic characteristics of Haiti. 421

Until Pétion's time the island had never known small properties. 178
Large estates had been the mark of social distinction in the French colony; Toussaint had kept the plantations large,[18] while Dessalines and Christophe had absorbed more and more land for the state, leasing it out in great blocks. The constitution of 1806[19] gave no indication of impending change, for it specifically declared all land to be the property of the Haitian nation. Within three years, however, the process of dividing and giving away the state's lands was well under way.

It would be illuminating to know what mental process in Pétion moved him to make so radical an about-face in land policy. The reasons he gave were, first, that the people had ably defended their country and so deserved a reward; second, that he wanted all the people to have a vital interest in the actual soil itself.[20] These may have been his only reasons. Others suggest themselves: the republic owed wages to its large standing army, which were more easily paid in land, of which the state had much, than in cash, of which it had little and progressively less; it would be much easier to keep peace in a country where men were free than where they were serfs; and the example of free ownership in the South would seem alluring enough

[427]

18. He permitted the leasing of plantations as small as fifty acres if the soil were especially rich.

19. December 27. This document was largely the handiwork of Pétion.

20. The former explanation he consistently gave in his various messages to the Senate proposing progressive parcelings of the land; the latter he wrote to a friend, saying that he wished to "*travailler chez tous l'amour de soi.*"

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

to Christophe's serfs in the North to cause defections ultimately sufficient to win the civil war for the republic."

Those who would read into Pétion's democratization of land ensure the liberal convictions of a far-sighted statesman must ignore the evidence of his earliest land acts. For two or three years nothing was so apparent as that Pétion wished to please his friends, the mulatto aristocrats. He not only had the Senate restore to their former owners all lands of which Dessalines had despoiled them, but he also agreed to a law authorizing a cash payment up to the full value of crops planted and then lost during the last year of the Emperor's rule.[21] By these concessions the President immediately wiped out the rancor left behind him by Dessalines, reversed that ruler's whole land policy, gained the support of thousands of aspirants for social position, and bound in personal loyalty to his régime all the colored leaders.

He went further. Insecurity of tenure under Dessalines had worried landlords who were not actually molested of their estates, and so the President undertook to guarantee security. Thereafter all sales of land were to be registered by government deed, and so confirmed to the purchaser in perpetuity; government courts would be empowered to settle disputes over payment of rents; proof of the death of the testator must be forthcoming before wills could be probated. Not even the single limitation on ownership—that if the proprietor of an estate should remain away from Haiti the state might lease his property and receive the income from it—disturbed them, for they were patriots enough, and poor enough, to feel that Haitians should live at home.

As if this were not enough to please the landed gentry, the tax

21. Saint-Rémy, *Pétion et Haïti* (Paris, 1854–57), V, 163–166, suggests another reason, namely, that people will always be more ready to defend land they actually own than for an impersonal state. This sounds logical, but certainly the Negroes had fought ardently enough to drive out the French in 1803, landless though they were. Saint-Rémy continues: "And moreover, was it not time to dismember the enormous plantations which still bore the names of those colonists whose mother country might still at any moment demand to reclaim their heritage? And could this dismemberment be achieved otherwise than by giving the people an honorable title to it?"

22. Two successive laws, February 9 and March 16, 1807, achieved these ends. The former specified that all persons who, by purchase or gift or legacy, had acquired land before November 1, 1803 (when Rochambeau surrendered) or since February 7, 1804 (when Dessalines had ordered a confirmation of all titles) should be newly assured of their rights to such holdings. There was a single, possibly unimportant, limitation: the acquisition must have been *by* Haitians *from* Haitians.

31 Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

applicant, of his regular conduct, and his ability to maintain himself economically in the town. Land laborers might not send their children to school or have them apprenticed in a town without a certificate from the same judge. Under no pretext might a worker establish a shop or sell his produce in the countryside; certain exceptions were made of necessary articles of food and home manufacture. No laborer might build a home in rural parts except on the plantation to which he was attached.

An individual, once placed by the government in the category of "cultivator," might never be removed from that class except by official authorization. Even with the consent of the proprietor and the agricultural administrator of the district, he was not to quit the estate to which he was bound for more than eight days.

We may further note in the Code that coöperative enterprise among the workers is forbidden. Anticipating the possible tendency of laborers to set up what in modern times would be called a producers' coöperative, presumably to lapse thereafter into laziness, the Code requires that every worker engage himself individually by authentic contract to the service of a proprietor or lessee. Such engagements for la grande culture are not to be for less than three years, or more than nine. Penalties for infractions of these rules are fines, imprisonment, or forced labor on public works in the chief town of the commune.

The Code directs the management of agricultural property and grazing establishments,[20] also the making of contracts between the proprietor and his hirelings. Rural police are established, in imitation of Christophe's Dahomets, to act as inspectors of plantations and of the workers on them.

The section repressing vagrancy is very full. All persons not proprietors or lessees, yet living in rural parts without having made a contract with some producer, are classed as vagabonds, to be arrested and taken before the magistrate. This official will warn them that by law they are bound to make a contract, and that if they refuse they will be sent to prison. Should a vagabond persist in refusing to sign a contract after eight days of confinement, he is condemned to labor on public works until he agrees. Should the prisoner be a minor, he will be sent to his parents.

20. This latter item was inserted as an adjustment to one of the primary occupations of the Spanish end of the island.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

unplanned, undesired
Haitian peasantry, to sum up, began as the result of two policies intended to achieve ends quite different; first, presidential gifts of land, the chief purpose of which had been to pay the soldiers of the republic; and second, the crop-sharing system adopted by landlords after the failure of Boyer's Code.

6. *The Drawing of Caste Lines (1820–1843)*

Almost every major presidential aim of Boyer came to grief. His tranquil quarter-century rule, the unified island, the financial surplus with which his presidency began, the peace with France after 1825—all these advantages combined with his good intentions did not save his projects from shipwreck. Near the beginning of his régime he announced that, like his revered predecessor Pétion, he felt the safety of Haiti to lie in the abolition of all color distinctions and prejudices. Just as his great Code Rural proved a complete failure, however, so did his efforts to do away with the color line. On the contrary, it was during Boyer's time that class distinctions became fixed, in large part although not wholly, on the basis of color.

Stating that the policy of his government was to put an end, as far as possible, to jealousies of caste, he consistently for a few years promoted a black every time a promotion had been given to a mulatto or other light-skinned person. This procedure soon met an insuperable obstacle. Government posts in general required literacy, and only a very small number of blacks were educated, so that the supply of Negroes was not sufficient to furnish him with candidates. Since one of the few roads to lucrative success lay in official positions, ambitious young colored men sought eagerly for government office, and Boyer soon had no alternative but to advance men of his own complexion. In the army, on the other hand, literacy was not necessary for promotion. Ambitious Negro youths, therefore, frequently chose this career which, while not very profitable in monetary rewards, at least gave a man a certain social status and economic security.

Because of the state of education in the republic, consequently, an ugly situation developed, with the civil arm of government almost wholly in control of the colored element and the military force dominated by blacks. Fortunately for the country no crisis developed during the 1820's and 1830's which made an open breach between army and state.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

fortunes, that is, a few thousands of dollars, for a small number of élite, and to make the presidency a position economically rewarding enough to justify revolutionary conspiracies. The growth of a peasantry set in train during the long régime of Boyer continued, unbroken even by the numerous insurrections, until fixed in the mores. Land owned by the countryfolk was divided and redivided among their heirs, so that even holdings of moderate size became smaller.

Not one of the twenty-two rulers following Boyer made the slightest effort to return the country to the forced labor system of Dessalines and Christophe. They seemed to recognize the inevitability of a peasant way of life, or at least the impossibility of luring the people back to directed labor after a long experience of freedom. On the contrary, several presidents still further parceled the land.

President Guerrier, for example, the very year after Boyer was deposed, put on sale at moderate prices those state lands in the North not reserved for public use.[5] If the revolutionaries of 1843 had hoped to bring back Christophe's system of forced labor, their hopes were doomed to disappointment because of the state's need of immediate income. Christophe's state land areas were now broken up in the one part of the country where a few large plantations still existed.

President Geffrard in 1862 gave his blessing to small ownership, the basis of peasantry. Whereas Pétion's laws had prohibited sales of land in parcels less than fifteen acres, Geffrard's law regularized the leasing and sale of national property in lots of fifteen acres *at most*. Geffrard was the first president openly to admit that many government lands had been lost to citizens by squatting. In an endeavor to give legality to land held by squatters' rights, his law demanded that squatters register their claims, announcing that within a short time there would be no further dismemberment of the national patrimony except by grants and sales.[6] Few registrations were made, however, for the Haitian peasant had already acquired a suspicion of legal documents he could not read or understand, and he could see no reason for legalizing a status in which, with the squatter's tenacity and inertia, he already felt himself secure.

Haiti was in constant financial straits. Money had to be borrowed

5. By a law of September 23, 1844.
6. Law of August 14, 1862. The articles cited here are 2 and 4.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

to attempt to retrace the path of property evolution, which has steadily taken its own course since the time of Pétion."

With the peasants prevailingly satisfied in their daily round of life, the separation of upper and lower castes in Haitian society has gradually become an accepted fact. At least ninety per cent of the total population now belong to the peasant group, whose members are as much reconciled to their status as in the United States the poorest colored folk to theirs. Vaguely they may often wish they had the privileges and luxuries of those above them; often, likewise, they feel resentment at the way in which they are treated; but in so far as it is permissible to generalize about two million people, it is fair to say that the Haitian peasant rarely complains of his lot.

Of the remaining ten per cent of the population a small fraction look upon themselves as élite. Some families of this group can be traced back to colonial times when their ancestors were already affranchis; others began to take on aristocracy under Dessalines, Christophe, Pétion, and Boyer. Those whose forebears have become élite only since 1843 are less firmly entrenched in the topmost class. However, since no president since Boyer has ever succeeded in weakening caste lines, the élite one or two per cent may be said to constitute a stable social group.

It is significant that although the blacks had the government in their hands for three quarters of a century they were unable to effect any slight change either in caste membership or in caste lines.

The part of the population which is neither élite nor peasant is not "middle class," as that term is understood in the Western World. It is rather a shifting percentage of Haitians whose one prevailing characteristic is their residence in towns. Some are wage earners, some small tradesmen; some are ex-élite on the way down the

11. The intimate observer of the Haitian peasant never fails to comment upon his love of the land. Whereas the colonial planter attached a value to his estate because it produced wealth, the peasant loves his little plot because it is his home. Through all the fifteen successive constitutions of Haiti, the one unchangeable article has been the prohibition of sale to foreigners of real estate in the country. Haitian land is for Haitian people—or was so until after the American Occupation. Likewise, the peasant is suspicious of any law which seems likely to reintroduce the system of large properties, for these might condemn him to leave his land and work at wages for the benefit of a master who, whether kindly or pitiless, would still deprive him of his present liberty. Therefore the Haitian countryman defends with all his force this soil to which his liberty attaches him, and which he cultivates after his own manner. "The Haitian loves his land almost as a man loves his woman."

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

it seems not radically to have affected the masses but only the fairly well-to-do.

The *Royal Almanac* for the year 1814 touches proudly upon the moral state of the kingdom. The author of the almanac, the Comte de la Limonade, says: "Great attention is paid to morals and manners. Marriage is honored, protected, and encouraged; no Haitian who is unmarried can fill any place of distinction. Divorce is not permitted." All this was true; yet the mass of Haitians still remained unmarried. Nevertheless, the quotation indicates the extent to which Christophe had gone in his effort to reform marriage and morals among his people; to set them in the European tradition and draw them out of their African and colonial backgrounds.

While Christophe was trying to effect reforms in the North, Pétion was accepting his Southern folk as they were. Hardly a law during his twelve-year administration touches the subject of marriage. The élite colored people continued to make proper legal marriages and so insure the inheritance of their legitimate children. The common folk lived their family lives without weddings, and if property questions arose, custom ruled, backed by public opinion in their little communities.

Such are the backgrounds out of which modern Haitian sex relations have developed. From African tradition came family life, the importance of property to stabilize a union, insignificance of a wedding ceremony, familiarity with matrilineal kinship and descent; from French colonial practice, formal marriage to establish a family with social ambition, casual sex relations for pleasure outside this marriage, the claim of legitimate children to all property (in contrast to folk custom, where few legitimate children were born); from Dessalines, an emphasis upon the African tradition and realism; from Christophe, an insistence upon strict French practice in marriage and in the passage of property.

From among these alternatives Haiti made a choice which is an excellent example of what Keller calls "automatic selection in the mores."[7] There was no congress to select one procedure rather than another. Because Pétion and Boyer followed a *laissez-faire* policy in social matters, the people took the path of least resistance.

7. A. G. Keller, *Societal Evolution* (revised ed., New York, 1931), chaps. IV and V.